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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the challenge of building family-school-community partnerships and the variety of ways that families within one ethnic group can be involved in their children's education, this publication summarizes research findings about Chinese American young children and their families and suggests strategies that can be pursued by families and educators to build a more fruitful partnership to promote Chinese American children's success in school. Topics covered, using a question-answer format, include: (1) major research findings that teachers and administrators should know; (2) the diversity present among Chinese American families, especially between those who have completed all their education in American schools, those who completed part of their education overseas, and immigrant parents who completed all their education overseas; (3) parents' views on education, schools, and teachers; (4) characteristics of successful children; (5) the distinction between Chinese traditional reverence for teachers and schools and current complaints about American schools; (6) Chinese American parents who do not seem to care about their children's education; (7) ways Chinese American parents support their children's education at home; (8) suggestions for building strong partnerships between educators and Chinese American parents, especially recognizing the diversity of Chinese Americans, the need to encourage extended family involvement, and the need to better understand the concept of "training" in Chinese childrearing philosophy and how it differs from authoritarianism; (9) findings about teachers of particular interest to Chinese American parents; and (10) suggestions for Chinese American parents who want to support their child's schooling. (KDFB)

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Questions & Answers

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What Research Says About the Education of Chinese American Children

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Sau-Fong Siu

Center on Families, Communities, Schools & Children's Learning

Purpose

This publication summarizes knowledge

from new research about

Chinese American young children

and their families and suggests strategies

that can be pursued by

families and educators to build

a more fruitful partnership to promote

Chinese American children's success in school.

Sources of Information

a review of the literature on educational achievement
and Chinese Americans

a review of the literature on Chinese American parents' involvement
with their children's education

the author's longitudinal, ethnographic study of ten Chinese American
families with young children

the author's interviews with kindergarten, first grade, and second grade
urban and suburban school teachers
who have Chinese American children in their classrooms

a survey of ninety Chinese American families with children in
kindergarten, first grade, and second grade

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What are the major research findings from your study of Chinese American children and their families that teachers and administrators should know?

- Chinese Americans are not a homogenous group. The Chinese have had a 150-year-old history in the United States. Not all Chinese American parents are immigrants, and not all Chinese American children are high achievers.

- Chinese American parents are involved in different ways to help their children succeed in school. We can't speak of "the" pattern of Chinese American parental involvement with education that produces children who do well in school.

- Patterns of Chinese American parents' involvement with their children's education vary according to many factors, such as length of stay in the United States, extent of acculturation, familiarity with the U.S. school system, perception of their status in the United States, and their school's practices to involve families.

- Language is not the only barrier to parents' active participation in the schools. Other factors are unfamiliarity with the school structure, discomfort with an active parental role in the school building, and conflicts with work schedules.

- Chinese American children whose parents do not participate actively in school functions and policy-making bodies can and do succeed in school.

- There sometimes is disagreement between teachers and some Chinese American parents about how much academic work is appropriate for young children.

- Regardless of socioeconomic class and place of birth, Chinese American families use a variety of community resources, both formal and informal, to support their children's education. Older siblings, grandparents and other extended family members may play significant roles in fostering school success in young children.

- Most Chinese American parents believe it is very important for their young children to enjoy learning.

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Can you say something about the diversity among Chinese American families?

- As in all racial groups, there are nuclear families, extended families, single-parent headed families, and other forms among Chinese Americans. The 1990 Census data show that Asian Americans do have a higher proportion of families with two parents than other racial groups, but families vary in composition and in socioeconomic status.

- There are more immigrant Chinese Americans than U.S.-born Chinese Americans.

- There are at least three types of Chinese American parents:

  Type I parents are U.S.-born parents who have gone through the American educational system. They are familiar with how schools operate and they see themselves as successful in schooling and in their careers. They feel secure about their status in the United States.

  Type II parents received their earlier schooling overseas but also attended school in the United States. In many areas they try to find a balance between traditional Chinese views and practices and American views and practices.

  Type III parents are immigrants who completed their schooling overseas and do not see themselves as successful or secure in the socioeconomic sense.

How do these different types of parents differ in their views on education, schools, and teachers?

- Type I parents see their role in education as a partner with the school. They expect to contribute skills and talents to the school. Type III parents see their role as quietly supplementing what the school does for their children. However, when necessary, both Type I and Type III parents advocate for their children.

- Type I parents are more likely than Type III parents to believe that parental efforts to change the school will work. They are also more likely to be involved as volunteers and policy-makers in schools than are Type III parents. Type III parents are more concerned with the academic aspect of the school.

- Type I parents define good teachers as those who are able to foster the child's social development and treat the child as an individual. Type III parents define good teachers as those who are strict, able to maintain order in the classroom, and assign a lot of homework.

- Type I parents are more likely to think of education, especially higher education, as an opportunity to enrich oneself and to make friends. Type III parents are more likely to think of higher education as a way to achieve economic security.

- Type II parents tend to fall between Type I and Type III parents on the above issues.

What characteristics do the successful children in your study have in common?

- Children identified by their teachers as successful students have very positive feelings about teachers and the school. Most children have attended some type of preschool program.

- Successful children are aware of being Chinese American early in life, even though race and ethnicity are not emphasized by the parents.

- These children have good and stable relationships with their parents and other family members.

- Successful Chinese American students are from all types of families — those with parents educated in the United States, overseas, or both.

One hears a lot about the Chinese traditional reverence for teachers. Is this true of Chinese American parents today?

■ Most Chinese American parents respect teachers and the school as an institution. This does not mean, however, that they are satisfied with everything that is going on in their children's schools.

■ The four most frequent complaints about public schools, especially by Chinese American parents who are immigrants, are: lax discipline, lack of moral education, poor mathematics training, and insufficient homework.

■ Many Chinese American parents complain that they do not hear about their children's problems from teachers when problems first surface. They prefer more frequent, direct, specific feedback rather than the general, "She is doing okay" or "Everything is fine with him."

■ Respect and trust are different qualities. Respect is proper acceptance or courtesy, holding someone in esteem. Trust occurs at a deeper level when a parent feels, "You (that is, the teacher or the school) will do right by my child. You know, understand, and share my expectations of my child. You validate my efforts to help my child." Most Chinese American parents don't trust their schools in this way. Many feel that they have to watch the school and their children's progress carefully.

How about Chinese American parents who do not seem to care about their children's education?

- As in the rest of the population, Chinese American parents vary in the amount of time, money, and energy they invest in their children's education.

- There are many reasons why caring parents may not show up in school or respond to school notices. Besides, parents can be involved in their children's education in more than one or two ways. It is better to assume that almost all parents care about their children's education.

- In some poorer, newer immigrant Chinese American families, education takes a back seat to economic survival. Because of the pervasive absence of these parents in their children's lives, schools and social agencies may have to assume parental functions of providing breakfast or lunch, securing basic medical care, providing supervision, and monitoring homework.

- Language barriers could severely limit parents' ability to be supportive of their children's schooling. For example, one survey of Chinese American parents in New York City found that less than half of the Chinese American parents were able to understand everything on their children's report cards without the help of a dictionary or translator.

- For U.S.-born Chinese American parents and those who are longtime immigrants, work schedules are probably the primary obstacles to participation in school events and organizations.

What are the different ways Chinese American parents support their children's education at home?

- Parents who were born or raised in the United States are more likely to read regularly to the child, choose extracurricular activities that reflect the child's interest or talent, and pay more attention to the child's social development than to grades and class ranks.

- Immigrant parents who are unfamiliar with how the U.S. school system works are more likely to emphasize drills or practice skills with their children, emphasize proper behavior, monitor homework tightly, make up extra homework, and urge their children to work hard and achieve academically. They are more vigilant about the child's grades, scores, and being on the honor roll.

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What suggestions do you have for educators who wish to build a strong partnership with Chinese American parents?

- It is important for educators to understand the diversity of Chinese Americans, including diversity among Chinese Americans who are immigrants. This understanding should be grounded in knowledge of the history of the Chinese in the United States (Siu, 1992). Professional development activities for teachers should address within-group differences in Chinese American and other social and ethnic groups.

- The concept of "parent support" of education should be broadened to "family support" of education. Many significant others contribute to a child's care and education, and schools could invite and encourage grandparents and other extended family members to attend school functions and parent-teacher conferences.

- Teachers and administrators should value and support the day-to-day contributions family members make to their children's education at home and in the community. There is no "hierarchy" of parental involvement; serving on parent councils and volunteering in schools are not "higher" or "better" activities than providing the child with a stable home environment, helping the child develop a positive attitude toward school, and encouraging the child's efforts in studying (Epstein, 1995).

- Because there is often an active informal parental network that passes information back and forth about education and enrichment activities, schools may want to consider tapping into existing ethnic community networks and working with indigenous leaders to reach out to Chinese American families, especially those who are relatively new to this country.

- Teachers could encourage Chinese American parents who are not proficient in English to read stories in Chinese to their children and to have their children read to them. This can be presented as "homework" for young children.

- Teachers and administrators need to better understand and accept the concept of "training" in Chinese childrearing philosophy (Chao, 1994). The traditional Chinese parenting pattern includes moralizing, monitoring children, setting high standards, and guiding children toward meeting these standards, within a relationship of intense love and concern. Do not equate this pattern with the western notion of "authoritarian parenting" and try not to be too ready to judge Chinese American parents who seem strict. Many of them recognize the potential harm of excessive pressures and are in tune with their children's emotional well-being.

What are some findings about teachers that are of particular interest to Chinese American parents?

- Kindergarten teachers in urban and suburban schools believe that successful children are able to work independently, have good social skills, are motivated to learn, are enthusiastic, are able to concentrate, and are confident.

- Even within the same school, different teachers have different ideas of what a successful student is. You have to realize that one teacher may see your child as successful but another teacher may not. Some kindergarten teachers stress social and verbal abilities, while others stress fine motor skills such as cutting with scissors and having neat handwriting.

- Teachers' expectations for first grade students and kindergarten students are quite different. First graders usually have a longer school day, are expected to sit longer at desks, and do more "academic" work. Thus, the transition from kindergarten to first grade is a crucial step in your child's school career.

- Excessive absence from school, even in kindergarten, hinders a child from making progress.

- Teachers desire an open and two-way relationship with parents. They like to hear positive comments, not just complaints, from parents.

- From the teachers' point of view, the most helpful thing you as a parent can do is to show interest in your children and talk with them about school and other things going on in their lives.

What suggestions do you have for Chinese American parents who want to support their children's schooling?

- Convey to your children your own positive view of school and teachers, and your valuing of education.

- Make sure your child gets enough sleep, eats a good breakfast, and attends school regularly.

- Cultivate curiosity and a love of learning in your child.

- Help your child develop listening skills and self-control before entering kindergarten.

- Help your child develop social skills. Provide opportunities to play with children from different cultural backgrounds.

- Involve all family members in supporting your child's schooling. For example, an older sibling may read to a younger child; it would benefit both of them. A grandparent or another relative may accompany your child to the library.

- Read to your child regularly in English or Chinese. Make sure that there are always books around the home, or take your child to the public library.

- Find out from the school what is expected of you and of your child each year.

- Keep asking questions of teachers and other school personnel. Ask about your child's progress, and about the curriculum, school functions, reasons for actions taken by the school, volunteering in school or at home, and other questions that you have.

- Find someone (other than one of your children) to be interpreter if you need to speak to a teacher or principal. If you can't find one on your own, request one from the school.

- Take advantage of community programs such as museums, art galleries, concerts, story-times in public libraries. Some programs are free of charge.

- Look at your child's report card, read school notices, attend parent-teacher conferences, and attend your child's performances whenever possible. These activities tell your child that school is important and tell the teacher that you care about your child's education.

■ Do not do your child's homework for him or her. Ask your child what the homework is, set aside a time and place for homework, and discuss interesting things that your child is learning.

■ Talk to other parents about how they help their children. You don't have to do everything other parents do, but you may get ideas from each other. There is no one formula that will work for all children.

■ Find out what your rights are as parents. If you or your children are not yet good in English, the following handbook is a good resource: **The Rights of Limited English Proficient Students: A Handbook for Parents and Community Activists,** San Francisco, CA: Multicultural Education, Training and Advocacy, Inc. (META), 1992. This manual, available in Chinese, English, and several other languages, covers such topics as assessments, staff requirements, instruction, mainstreaming, and funding. You may order the manual from META, 524 Union Street, San Francisco, CA 94133; 415-398-1977.

■ Get to know other parents in your child's school. Changes in the school are more likely to occur if parents act together. The following kinds of groups for parents are in most schools.

PTO (Parent-Teacher Organizations) and **PTA** (Parent-Teacher Associations): These are groups of parents and teachers who work with the school administration on projects that support the school.

School Advisory Councils and School Councils: These are elected or appointed representatives of parents, teachers, and administrators who give advice to school officials about specific programs.

School Boards: Each school district has an elected or appointed decision-making board consisting of parents or other members of the community.

Parent Advocacy Groups: These are groups of parents organizing to change certain school policies or improve the school overall. Advocacy groups do not have to have the approval of the school to operate.

Bilingual Parents Associations or Chinese Parents Associations: These organizations are found in some schools that have many Chinese-speaking students or parents or that offer bilingual education programs. Parents' meetings are either conducted in Chinese or Chinese interpreters are available.

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Concluding Remarks

In the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* of 1994, improving education through family-school-community partnerships is one of the eight national goals. In a multiracial society such as the United States, building family-school-community partnerships can be an enormous challenge. Research has shown that there is not one set way for families to be involved in their children's education. Even within one ethnic group, there are many different patterns of involvement. Although Chinese American parents do not always see eye to eye on some issues of involvement, there is a common ground upon which a positive family-school partnership can be built. And when families and schools work in concert, children almost always do better in school than they would otherwise have done.

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